A Tale of Two Narratives: Student Voice – What Lies Before Us?

Abstract

As the last century closed, and a bright new millennium dawned, the concept of 'student voice' within education emerged as something to be '*identified*' and '*captured*'. In effect, it became reified and driven by a raft of government and institutional policies and strategic initiatives; initially within the compulsory sector, but soon followed by the post-compulsory sector as the 2000s moved on. In an increasingly quasi-consumerist environment, a mechanism had emerged with potential to '*measure*' student satisfaction. Institutions quickly took up the 'call to arms', assigning responsibilities to ensure there was evidence of 'student voice' engagement; but there was no conversation with the 'students' about *how* this was experienced by them. This concept had become a 'portmanteau' term; a 'catch all' (Fielding, 2009) competing between two narratives – student voice as democratic and transformational; and student voice as 'policy' and strategic initiative. Formal research that could contribute to this discussion has been sparse and this paper takes a critical stance to the literature and policy, exploring the current *status* of student voice and proposing a research focus that has the potential to involve students in a discussion about *how* their voice is heard, and for what purpose.

Key words

Student voice; learner involvement; policy; further education; higher education; teacher education

Introduction

The title of this article has paraphrased the wonderful opening lines of Dickens' (1859) 'Tale of Two Cities' and whilst not considering whether we are contemplating our ultimate direction of travel (to Heaven or Hell) in terms of our approaches to student voice, there is something about what we have before us in our options: do we have 'everything', or 'nothing'? Do we have the 'transformational' or the 'tokenistic' (Rudduck, 2006)?

In setting out to address these questions this article begins by engaging in a critical dialogue with the literature, policy and learner involvement strategies, and existing research. It considers student voice not as a 'technique' (Fielding, 2011) but rather as situated within wider context; as both 'espoused' and 'enacted'. At the moment students predominantly make their voice(s) heard in a 'formal' context where there are opportunities provided for them to do so; but who decides upon the format of these; who *allows* passage and who sets the terms for that experience. Frost (2008, p. 354) suggests that this 'notion of voice' is more attuned to supporting school improvement plans, rather than the 'development of individual identity or the creation of a person-centred community'; but what if there was a way to engage in a more meaningful dialogue. Let us suppose that there was a means by which the strictures and constraints, those elements that 'inhibit agency and diminish the hope of change' (Frost, 2008, p. 355) could be overcome. That *voice(s)* could be understood as having agency and being enacted; that identity and relationship

construction was practiced in terms of the *micro* and *meso* layers (Hall, 2015) and not only as a result of input into the *exo* institutional relationship (Bragg and Manchester, 2012; Yanuzzi and Martin, 2014).

Having reviewed these aspects, this article will consider a dialogue which, rather than focusing only on institutional requirements, outlines new research which is exploring how individual perspectives could contribute to a new way of thinking about what student voice might mean across diverse environments and curriculum settings. The discussion focuses predominantly within the United Kingdom to establish the context and relevance for this future research, but also acknowledges a broader, international discourse to explore where there might be a convergence or divergence of themes.

Exploring how *micro* and *meso* interactions construct their individual and combined identities and pathways, the research poses the question: if the *students* could define it, what might student voice look like, and why?

Background: Policy and Learner Involvement Strategies

Many of us will recall when Tony Blair gave his famous 'Education, Education, Education' speech to the Labour Party Annual Conference in Brighton, 1997. It was the start of a New Labour government (1997 – 2010) responsible for generating a number of policy documents designed to encourage youth participation: two of which – (DfES, 2001) Learning to Listen: Core Principles for

Involvement of Children and Young People, and DfES (2003) Every Child Matters – were responsible for delivering a number of reforms alongside the Children Act (2004). To an extent, these were in response to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) which at its heart espoused the rights of the child to have a say in those matters which had an effect on them. It also emphasised the need for children to be provided with opportunities to develop their ability to be 'responsible citizens' with explicit connections being made within an international landscape, between student voice, civic engagement and active citizenship (Bahou, 2011; Bergmark and Kostenius, 2011; Toshalis and Nakkula, 2012; Mitra, 2016) thus extending the potential influence of student voice activities beyond the educational setting. Within the United Kingdom, since the Education Act (2002) schools have been legally required to engage in consultation with their pupils; this has been further reinforced through statutory guidance issued by the DfE (2014) stating that schools must identify "how best to provide opportunities for pupils to be consulted on matters affecting them or contribute to decision-making in the school".

Running almost in tandem with these changes to policy for the compulsory sector, were a number of policy directives from the DfES (2003; 2005; 2006a; 2006b) aimed at the post-compulsory aged sector; in particular Further Education. The Foster Report (2005) also set in motion the legal obligation for colleges to have a Learner Involvement Strategy which needed to be reviewed on an annual basis, in collaboration with students and their representatives. What

resulted at that time for the further education sector were three key strands and organisations were expected to aspire to these in order to meet the requisite quality assurance standards (Framework for Excellence, 2007; QIA, 2008):

- a personalisation agenda – designed to involve learners from an individual perspective; strengthening teaching and learning in response;
- a 'collective' approach – engaging learners as 'representative' of their peers (student representatives, student councils, surveys, fora, etc.)
- the development of the organisation – creating a learner involvement 'culture' ensuring that learners are included at various levels of decision-making

Higher Education was not excluded from this and followed suit with several policy statements coming forth: Students at the Heart of the System (BIS, 2011); Putting Learners at the Centre (2011) focussing on students in Scotland; and a Policy Statement on Higher Education (2013) issued by the Welsh Government.

With what has now become an 'accepted', almost constant state of flux existing in post-compulsory education, policy and political activity have had a dramatic impact on the concept and purpose of student voice. Higher education in the UK has witnessed the removal of the student cap (Hillman, 2014) and rises in tuition fees; further education is in the midst of Area Reviews (BIS, 2016) which will see a major restructuring of provision in post-16 education and training institutions. Voice, therefore, now has real commercial 'value' attached to it (Naidoo and Jamieson, 2005); it contributes to league tables, national student survey (NSS)

and Key Information Set (KIS) HE datasets for example. Learner voice has, to a degree, become 'politicised' and 'incorporated into managerialistic rhetoric' (Wisby, 2011, p.37) with what *could* be discussed being prescribed and contained, and what was *found*, being interpreted within these constraints, "as if the act of speaking is all that matters" (Thomson, 2011, p.25). In a sense, the 'student voice' has become a noun – reified into a 'thing' that can be measured and benchmarked, and evidenced through a range of prescribed 'mechanisms' (Katsifli and Green, 2010). At this stage, however, it would be fair to acknowledge that importance **is** being, and **has** been, accorded to the *act* of listening to learners, but the *purpose(s)* and *judgement(s)* around why this is being done, are what need to be considered (Tedder, Jones and Mauger, 2008, p.25).

We know from experience that there are a number of established routes and roles for student voice across the sectors: student representatives and student unions; student fora; surveys; student governors; and in some instances students engaged collaboratively as co-researchers (Cook-Sather, 2006; Forrest *et al*. 2007; Shuttle, 2007; Walker and Logan, 2008; Katsifli and Green, 2010; Bahou, 2011; LSIS, 2012; Groundwater-Smith and Mockler, 2016; Seale, 2016). In the 1990s, we started out with something else; student-initiated, shared discourses which could align to Hart's *Ladder of Participation* (1992) and enable learners to develop 'greater self-esteem, heightened self-confidence, interpersonal and political skills, and self-efficacy' (Frost, 2008, p.356). There was a need to have

insight and to be able to see 'learning through the learner's eyes' (Ramsden, 1998, p. 353) and for students to feel that their experiences and their 'modes of showing are recognised, respected and valued' (Bernstein, 2000, p.174 cited in Arnot and Reay, 2007, p318). These different aspects were demonstrated within different ways of talking; different voices and the acknowledgement of what had contributed to the identity of those voices; and the way(s) within which these voices were enabled to express a point of view which is valued.

There is thus a need to refocus on the 'connection between student voice combined with the notion of democratic practice……[and the recognition that]….Students can serve as important sources of information that are otherwise unavailable' (Mitra, Frick and Crawford, 2011, p. 368). Our greatest challenge now is how to facilitate the creation of spaces in which student voice is not merely demonstrated as being present, but in which that presence also has power, authenticity and validity. If we remain with our current system, there is potential for student voice to remain actively passive in that this reified 'voice' speaks, but only within pre-defined and legitimised contexts and formats which essentially 'co-opt' these contributions towards managerial/quality assurance requirements (Roberts and Nash, 2009).

A review of some of the challenges of learner voice was published by the UK's National Union of Students (2013, p.3) who reported that although 'not widely researched, there is anecdotal evidence to suggest that some colleges have

"moved" the staff support resource for FE students' unions and learner voice over to Quality and Curriculum departments.' The implications of this need to be considered across a number of levels which link back to policy: the *personalisation agenda,* the *collective approach,* and the *organisational decision-making* (Framework for Excellence, 2007; QIA, 2008). Analysis and review of surveys and interviews (Katsifli and Green, 2010) conducted with colleges belonging to the 157 Group in England around strategies to develop Learner Involvement initiatives (DfES 2003; DfES 2006a, 2006b; LSC, 2007; Framework for Excellence, 2008; QIA, 2008) revealed that little progress has been made. This group comprises membership organisation and represents 27 large, regional Further Education colleges in England. These members are considered to be key strategic leaders in their locality who understand the importance of policy development, and improving the quality and reputation of further education.

Katsifli and Green's (2010) research indicated that although learners continue to contribute to the 'collective' and the 'organisation' routes, there is little indication as to how students become more engaged with the transformative and democratic (Bragg and Manchester, 2012). With the current round of Area Reviews (BIS, 2016) focusing outcomes on 'strong institutions' this 157 group must surely be sharpening its focus on what could contribute to an individual organisation's position within the marketplace. Accordingly, there is an emerging danger that with the commodification of education that situates the student as a 'consumer' who must have 'value for money', rather than as a

'change agent' with the potential to influence and bring forth transformation (Dunne and Zandstra, 2011, p.4), the perceptions held by students around 'voice' and the purpose(s) of that voice, are also changing. The relationship is no longer the same and it is not sufficient, or acceptable, to continue to make the same assumptions; to offer the same 'opportunities' for student voice; or to interpret that voice within the same parameters. Our 'narrative' has shifted, and with it, so have the pathways and options before us.

There is undoubtedly a 'reciprocal relationship between voice and power' (Yannuzi and Martin, 2014, p. 710) and this poses questions in relation to how institutions have ensured/will ensure that they engage with behaviours and policy that enable them to reform *with,* as well as *for,* the learners (Fullan, 2001; Fielding and Bragg, 2003): to be transformative and democratic and not to lose sight of the fact that 'structures don't have voices – people do' (Porter, 2008). To some extent, this intention was embedded within the policy directives, with the LSC (2007) providing a *Learner Involvement Strategy* (2007). This actively encouraged institutions in the further education sector to adopt an ethos that would evidence how learners contributed to the development of the organisation. This was, however, heavily situated within the realm of organisational quality improvements (Rudduck and Fielding, 2006) with a specific instruction to provide routes through which learners could 'bring fresh insights to help quality improvement' (LSC, 2007, p.12). The continuing implications of this for student voice have raised concerns around whether this is driving us

towards an ever more organisational and potentially tokenistic road wherein students' contributions are 'being co-opted towards essentially managerial ends' (Roberts and Nash, 2009, p. 4) – fulfilling those requirements feted by regulatory inspection bodies such as Ofsted – or whether we are seeking ways to engage with students as 'expert witnesses' (Flutter and Rudduck, 2004, p.4).

Existing Research

So, before this article begins to put forward proposals around new research, it is helpful to remind ourselves of the current state of play. As noted, to-date there has been little in the way of formal research into the concept of student voice. What exists within a compulsory sector environment tends to be anecdotal (Collinson, 2007; Forrest *et al*. 2007; Gunter and Thomson, 2006 and 2007; Shuttle, 2007; Walker and Logan, 2008). Some work has been done in higher education but it is noted that the majority of this has been 'descriptive rather than evaluative' and tended to focus on 'quality enhancement and assurance (Shah and Nair, 2006; Williams and Cappuccino-Ansfield, 2007) and staff or professional development (e.g. Dinsdale, 2002; Duffy and O'Neil, 2003; Campbell *et al.,* 2007)' cited in Seale (2009, p.996). There is undoubtedly good intent to engage learners in constructive dialogue, and in so doing to 'shape services' (Forrest *et al.,* 2007), but in providing such platforms, there is a need to consider who is assigning 'value' and 'worth' to that dialogue, and its outcomes; and what is the potential for these individuals to be involved in their learning communities

(Frost and Rogers, 2006; Rudduck and Fielding, 2006; Fielding, 2007; DeFur and Korinek, 2010, Mitra, Frick and Crawford, 2011).

This can, of course, be deliberately driven by a specific rationale and Bland (2011, p. 389) considers how marginalised students in Australian senior and middle schools, who came from educationally disadvantaged communities that were rich in 'cultural diversity' but poor in terms of income and employment, were given special consideration to be involved in 'students as researchers' projects. Where these students' views were acknowledged and 'acted on by the schools, significant change to student-teacher relationships and school culture has been achieved' (ibid). Although it recognises that this 'transformation' begins with those students, Bland (2011, p. 396) cautions that for this to be successful, institutional support is required at a senior level if 'tokenistic participation…[…]…where the students believe they lack that support…[does not]..risk a reinforcement of the experience of failure.' Even with a predefined remit, there are still questions around 'how' these students are selected, and by whom; if it remains the 'prerogative of the schools' (Bland, 2011, p. 391) there may be questions around the authenticity of that voice (Bahou, 2011).

Bahou (2011, p.2), drawing on work from the UK, USA and Australia, cautions that teachers' initial willingness to consult with students, does not always translate 'into responding to students' ideas' with a concern perhaps that the student voice is being given more 'worth' than that of the teacher. Focussing on

this aspect of 'worth' and 'value' Bahou (2011, p.7) cites a very useful overview of a much earlier analysis (Starhawk, 1988, p.10) of three types of power which have potential to influence these student-teacher interactions. This is predicated on the following: '*power over'*, based within hierarchical relationships (such as that of student and teacher); '*power-from-within*', focusing on how we connect to others and our environment, and the way in which this influences an individual's sense of agency; and '*power with'* which is established when there is a sense of 'shared influence' amongst equals. Bahou (2011, p.7) goes on to say that:

> The power to influence rests on having the skills and knowledge to cultivate the 'power-from-within' students and teachers and engage in 'power with' through dialogue and alliances among students, and between students and teachers (de los Reyes and Gozemba, 2002). Central to this joint endeavour are teachers who clearly have a role to play in not just hearing students, but also engaging with them (Lodge, 2005).

This 'shared influence' (Bahou, 2011) is something which resonates in research that explored how students might be involved as partners in the peer observation process (Hall, 2015) to enhance the teaching and learning experience. This was a small-scale action research-based project working with initial teacher educators in an HE in FE context in England; the 'students' being student teachers. It investigated perceptions around identities (teacher and/or student) and how 'voice' might be facilitated and given a 'space' and credibility. Post-observation discussions were used to provide such spaces so that students and teachers could 'engage in productive, collaborative dialogue' (Hall, 2015, p.

11). The data that emerged indicated that one of the key aspects influencing the *success* and *authenticity* of such conversations was around where that 'power' lay and the potential impact this had in terms of encouraging, or hindering, 'agency'. It is essential that we understand the importance of fostering these opportunities if we are to see 'meaningful change' and a greater sense of motivation and engagement (Toshalis and Nakkula, 2012).

So what might facilitate this? In 2012, LSIS produced a practice guide which included thirty case study examples from 22 institutions across the country (FE colleges, sixth forms, offender learning institutions, adult education, work-based training providers, specialist colleges, etc.) who shared their experiences of the various learner voice strategies they had tried. These included such things as students collaborating on the co-creation of a scheme of work; students trained and involved with teaching observations; student councils and fora; involvement in staff recruitment; mentoring; contributing to feedback around assessment models; acting as quality champions; and participating in research. LSIS (2012, p.3) wanted to highlight the 'potential role learners can play as *game changers*' in quality assurance. When looking at this work, which focuses discussion around an activity-based framework (*Talking Learner Voice - TLV*) that builds on FutureLab's earlier research (Rudd, Colligan and Naik, 2006; Walker and Logan, 2008), it is worth keeping that context in mind: this is around students contributing to *improvements in quality assurance*. This TLV approach utilises a 'ladder of engagement' which is used to describe the 'evolution of 'genuine'

learner voice along a continuum' (LSIS, 2012, p.5). This continuum ranges from *informing*, at one end, through *consulting, involving, collaborating* and finally *empowering*. These five stages, or steps, do not have to be linear, can be cumulative or overlap, and are used to describe a 'maturing relationship between learners, practitioners and the organisation' (ibid). However, there is something missing – an identification of how students are *directly* involved in bringing about change. Feedback from Exeter University, who were involved with one of the JISC-funded action research projects (LSIS, 2012, p.23) recognised just how important this aspect is.

> There is a subtle, but extremely important, difference between an institution that 'listens' to students and responds accordingly, and an institution that gives students the opportunity to explore areas that they believe to be significant, to recommend solutions and to bring about the required changes. The concept of 'listening to the student voice' – implicitly if not deliberately – supports the perspective of student as 'consumer', whereas 'students as change agents' explicitly supports a view of the student as 'active collaborator' and co-producer', with the potential for transformation.

Katsifli and Green (2010, p.5) explored these different, and inter-related elements to 'student voice', identifying three key aspects: student representation via formalised systems; processes which facilitate the collection of student feedback – and methods for responding to this; and active involvement of students in the 'design and delivery of their own learning'. They used their access to the 157 Group to gather data from 28 member colleges, with participants including college managers, student representatives, student governors, student union bodies, focus groups and surveys. Their findings

identified ‘consistency’ and ‘greater rigour’ – a ‘metric’ rather than that thing which by its very nature is individual, not homogenous – voice. Learner views thus become a ‘thing’ that contributes to a performance indicator; a *thing* which has meaning, and value, attributed to it by the educational institution within which it exists, or by external (*macro* level) drivers enacted via policy. We may espouse to want students to be ‘active participants in the construction of their worlds’ (Lensmire, 1998, p. 268) but the reality would appear to suggest that voice is privileged and more highly prized in some contexts than others, with current practices indicating that this rests squarely within the potential to be a ‘game changer’ in quality improvement (LSIS, 2012, p.3). Thus, there needs to be a clearer distinction between the *process* of student voice, and the *outcomes* (Seale, 2016) with the former focusing on the ways in which feedback is generated and the latter on potential for the strategic and/or transformational. If we are not careful, evidence suggests that we become mired in ‘processes’ and lose sight of the ‘voice(s)’ and the opportunity for the transformational. What we achieve instead is ‘surface compliance’ (Rudduck and Fielding, 2006) with the dominant discourse being driven by ‘governance, representation and rights (Fielding, 2001, 2004).

Accordingly, there are consequences in terms of where, and how, we position student voice and there needs to be a way of defining these ‘intentions’. Fielding (2006, p. 302) frames these within a helpful four-fold typology based upon the ‘interpersonal’ orientation of institutions: 1) impersonal with restricted formal

consultation, resulting in '**efficiency'** improvements; 2) affective community which a desire to foster closer '**understanding'**; 3) high performance learning organisations with breadth of formal and informal consultation opportunities striving for greater '**effectiveness'**; and 4) person-centred learning communities with diverse '**engagement'** opportunities desiring to enhance 'the development of wise persons'. We see differences and similarities emerge with levels 1 and 3 focussed on the concept of organisational improvement – efficiency and effectiveness; whereas levels 2 and 4 are rooted in learning communities which have a person-centred approach and a desire to offer students experiences which can empower. This does not, however, guarantee that students are either listened to, or that their views are incorporated.

A recent study by Bourke and Loveridge (2016) in New Zealand schools identified that often teachers interpret student views from the perspective of pedagogical and curriculum developments and it is perhaps only when students are more directly involved as 'joint constructors' of any emerging 'knowledge' that there is a shift away from the concept of students purely as generators of feedback 'data' (Groundwater-Smith and Mockler, 2016). What emerged from the Bourke and Loveridge (2016, p. 65) work, however, was that even where students had been 'involved', it was not necessarily what they were interested in. Students had been asked to focus on assessment, but what was of more importance to them was the *learning* and so they effectively 'moved the goal posts'. Interestingly the response from the teachers was to 're-orientate the focus back towards

curriculum and the key competencies' (ibid); they explored student voice responses from *their* frame of reference, not from that of the *students*.

DeFur and Korinek (2010, p.15) based their study on middle and high schools in the USA, with a focus on exploring student perspectives around what influences learning; their conclusions were that systems and structures need to be created in which 'all students can have a voice and contribute to the governance and community of secondary education'. Further work in the USA by Toshalis and Nakkula (2012, p. 24) drew similar conclusions, identifying the need for a 'spectrum of student voice oriented activity' that might range from initial expression, through consultation, participation, partnership, activism and onwards to becoming leaders of change.

However, the work of Mitra (2008, 2016) who likewise researches schools in the USA, found that often initiatives designed to engage with 'student voice' might only in fact facilitate listening to those learners who are easiest to hear and who are most likely to give you what you want; those who already know *how* to talk and who are most *able* to get their voice across (Powney and Hall, 1998; Forrest *et al.,* 2007; Tedder, Jones and Mauger, 2008; Breslin, 2011). There is thus the potential for this to result in a learner élite – a 'professional' student voice (Fielding, 2004; Collinson, 2007; Walker and Logan, 2008) and too often 'it is the same students who sit on the school council, act as student researchers, gain appointments as prefects….' and who are able to further develop the 'ability to

get *their* voice across' (Breslin, 2011, p. 67). Yet even they may tire of what is sometimes regarded as an almost constant 'scattergun' bombardment of systems and structures, of 'questionnaire fatigue' (LSIS, 2012, p. 8) which results in partial or even total disengagement.

There is a growing awareness that existing approaches are not as effective as they might be, and an emerging recognition of the power of 'collectivism' and 'co-construction' is gaining ground. Keen to explore the implications for learner voice in Further Education, the National Union of Students (2015) held a summit with various stakeholders to identify how learner voice could be used as 'a vehicle to improve the life experiences of students during college and after' (NUS, 2015, p.4). Recognising the impact of the current Area Reviews (BIS, 2016) in the post-16 sector they know that there will be new, merged institutions, so new models for Students' Unions will also need to be considered. How these newly formed institutions will wish to engage with these, and support them – both in terms of staffing and an appropriate environment from which to operate – remains to be seen.

A Way Forward

The stated aims of this article were to engage in a critical dialogue with the literature, policy and learner involvement strategies, and to consider existing research. In so doing, the contemplation of our two narratives has revealed a picture which fails to convince that we are even looking at the same map in

relation to the choice(s) available. Whilst acknowledging that there *are* clear choices (Rudduck, 2006), the start point, our fork-in-the-road, is not fixed. Dependent upon perspective, motivational drivers and *intent*, that choice of 'direction of travel' is influenced by numerous and varied elements (Frost, 2008) situated within and across the different system layers (*micro, meso, exo* and *macro*).

This article has established that there is a need for more research to be undertaken and so returns to recent work in this area (Hall, 2015) that explored how spaces can be created to enable students and teachers to participate in *dialogue.* We know that 'the views of students can stimulate reflection and the development of new thinking amongst teachers' (Messiou and Ainscow, 2015, cited in Bourke and Loveridge, 2016, p. 66) so research that builds on this initial study is being undertaken with teacher educators, student teachers and the students of these trainee teachers.

To do so, we have to acknowledge that perhaps part of the problem in establishing a more constructive approach to the development of student voice and the ways in which we enable opportunities for genuine agency, is that 'voice' can be regarded as a unilateral entity. *Voice* can exist entirely by itself; autonomous and something to be heard, or not. *Talk,* on the other hand is, by implication, a bi-directional activity – we engage in some form of interactive communication with at least one other person: we talk *to* someone and they

listen; hopefully they then talk back and the interaction continues with an exchange of thoughts and views. When we consider the word 'talk' we naturally assume that this involves 'dialogue', an opportunity to have a say

> on things that matter to you… […..]….but the implications of 'finding a voice' are greater; they engage with issues of personal identity [with some students being] aware of the difficulty of finding your own voice (Rudduck and Fielding, 2006, p. 224).

There are constraints though, with norms and behaviours that become dominant within institutions and that impact on the 'extent to which pupils […are…] able to actively construct their own knowledge and understanding' (Mercer and Dawes, 2014, p. 433), and in so doing, their sense of identity. The reasons why these cultural expectations become dominant are numerous, but we have identified many of these already: policy, marketisation, quality assurance, Ofsted!

With this new research additional layers are incorporated to explore what student voice, or perhaps we should begin to think of this as *student talk*, means from the perspectives of our students, rather than institutional and policy requirements. As such the research will spend a year working with 4 FE Colleges who deliver an HE in FE curriculum: Initial Teacher Education (ITE). Participants will contribute who are teaching educators; who are ITE 'trainee teacher' students (to establish what their perceptions are around student voice); and will then include the students of the trainee teachers. In this way, the range of educational circumstances has scope to broaden out to students who 'inhabit' different curriculum settings (for example, academic, vocational, work-based,

and training providers) and who come from different contexts: age, ethnicity, cultural, geographical, and socio-economic contexts, etc.

The aim will be to find out what *mechanisms* participants are aware of, and how they get involved with these, if at all. It is seeking perceptions about the *impact* they feel these *processes* have and whether they are of any use, and if so, why. Crucially, it will ask participants to define 'student voice' from their perspective and to express their views on what this might look like, and how it might be *heard,* if they had a choice. The findings will then be analysed to explore the implications for practice and policy.

Conclusion

> 'The greatest compliment that was ever paid me was when one asked me what I *thought*, and attended to my answer.' (Thoreau, 1863, p.1)

Just as we started in the mid-1800s, so we return and are now asked to consider a quote from the writings of Henry Thoreau. His work suggests that we reflect on how we lead our lives, and how much concern we have for our fellow beings and the ways in which we interact with them. Do these exchanges have real meaning, or are they perfunctory and situated in habit? There is something here about our understanding of what it means to 'talk' and how this is similar to, or different from, our perceptions of 'voice'; in spite of the policy drivers and initiatives over the past 15 – 20 years, the implicit concerns raised by Edwards

and Furlong (1978) that we do not use 'talk' to its full potential seem very pertinent.

If traditional approaches, and the relationship of student voice to the *micro, meso, exo* and *macro* levels (Hall, 2015) is to be addressed then we need to consider how *voice* becomes as inclusive and 'critically-oriented' into classroom and organisational discussions as possible (Yanuzzi and Martin, 2014). In order to do so, teachers need to critically reflect on their 'attitudes towards student voice, including the status that they are prepared to accord it as well as the ends to which they would wish to facilitate it' (Wisby, 2011, p.39). We need to find a way to view student voice as something which is not only regarded as a 'tool to improve measurable outcomes' (Czerniawski, 2012, p. 17) but as something that enables learners, individually and collectively, to contribute in a *new* way; as something that enables them to *talk*.

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